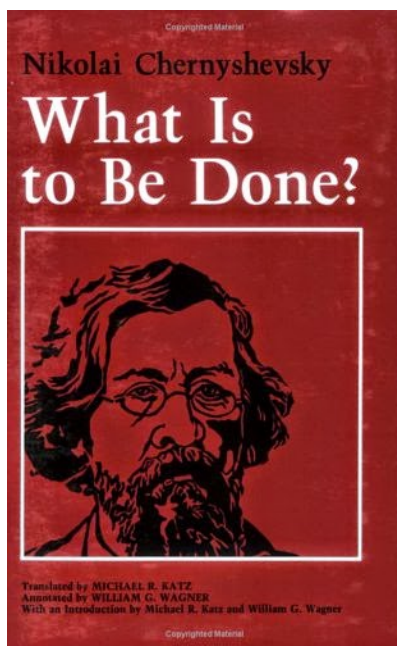


Classical Carousel

- a classic book conversation -

What is to Be Done? by Nikolai Chernyshevsky

Posted on **August 19, 2015** by **cleopatra**



"On the morning of July 11, 1856, the staff of one of the large hotels near the Moscow Railway Station in Petersburg was in a quandary, almost in a state of distress."

What do Chernyshevsky, Nietzsche and Star Trek all have in common? They all believe in socialist Utopias, in that if we all just could see the higher purpose of man and allow our characters to be developed beyond the animalistic tendencies of greed and selfishness and jealousy, we would all be able to lead this idealistic life with money, freedom, happiness and, in Nietzsche's case, right-thinking for all. Everyone would get exactly what they wanted in all things, and gratification and joy would abound everywhere. And this would all come in an erupting revolution that would change the world as we know it. Sounds good, doesn't it? Except that there's one

catch. In all of history, men have never been able to shed all strife and avarice and enmity towards each other. We have never been able to only do good, love mercy and walk humbly. So how these people can expect this to happen in the rumblings of revolution, yet also in an easily perceived development of social change, is quite beyond me.

"Delusional" is the word that springs first to mind.

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The Young Seamstress
Jean-Francois Millet
source [Wikiart](#)

starts her own sewing business, employing unusual business acumen to make it a success. Likewise, her marriage is run in an unusual business-like way, to the apparent delight of both. Yet when their close friend, another medical student, Alexánder Matvéich Kirsánov, begins to form an attraction to Véra, an impending tragedy culminates, and finalizes in a most unexpected way.

Although *What Is To Be Done?* is almost unknown in classic fiction, among Russians it was considered one of the most influential books of nineteenth-century Russia for the ramification it had on human thought, and the effect it had on the history of the country.

Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky was a staunch proponent of materialist philosophy, socialist political economy, and women's liberation. In his novel, he attempted to provide a remedy for all the social ills and the dilemmas that faced Russian society, believing that the controlling patriarchal hierarchy of the family, social inequality, and political and social problems were the main causes of the tyrannical, unbalanced, economic backwardness of the society. He disliked modern reform, advocating more radical steps. Offering a blend of Russian traditional values, and ideas from Western Europe, he called for a social education that would bring sexual freedom, self-awareness, and prosperity. However, his self-righteousness and intolerance of criticism eventually caused him to be barred from academia, and Chernyshevsky was forced to turn to journalism for an outlet. His views

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Moscow, Smolensky Boulevard, Study (1916)

Wassily Kandinsky

source [Wikiart](#)

This book served not only as a platform for Chernyshevsky's ideas, but it was also a response to Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. In Turgenev's novel, Turgenev explores the relationship between reason and emotion, or perhaps how emotion can undermine one's ideology. In *Fathers and Sons*, both the nihilist Bazarov's ideology and his underdeveloped grasp of emotion appear to cancel each other out, leaving him in a morass of ineffectuality in either. In contrast, the nobleman Kirsanov reaches a level of contentment using a combination of idealism and reason, mirrored in his recognition of family values, the importance of nature and the land on which he lives. Chernyshevsky despised the novel and Turgenev's portrayal of "new men"; with *his* novel, he strove to counter the portrayal, borrowing character names from Turgenev and metamorphosing Bazarov's nihilism into rational egoism for what he thought allowed for more efficient action. The ongoing debate continued with Fyodor Dostoyevsky's response to *What is To Be Done?*, in his *Notes from the Underground*.

Perhaps I was suffering with extreme impatience with naive "genius" philosophers and writers, but the impatience only increased with Chernyshevsky. Not only were his ideas born of some unrealistic fantasy, but the structure of his book was tedious. The book wasn't really a story, it was merely Chernyshevsky's ideas. Everyone is subordinate to his ideas, from his plot, to his characters, even his reader cannot escape. While I know that authors control their stories, I like to feel their stories control them to some degree; that the story is born inside of them with not only the passionate ideas that they breed, but perhaps with an insight that is not quite explored or realized. Then, voilà! A "conversation" is begun between reader and writer. Yet, with Chernyshevsky, this certainly wasn't the case.

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what he was offering you. I don't understand it. Often these people profess to know all the ills of society and all the solutions, but they have absolutely no social skills or even an appearance of love for humanity at all; or at least it doesn't come out in their work.

I'm going to read *Notes from the Underground* next to finish this conversation. Dostoyevsky confuses me, but he has to be better than Chernyshevsky. Doesn't he???

Trilogy:

[My Review of Fathers and Sons by Ivan Turgenev](#)

[My Review of What is To Be Done? – Nikolai Chernyshevsky](#)

[My Review of Notes From The Underground – Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#)

This entry was posted in [Author: Chernyshevsky](#), [Classics](#), [Review](#), [Russian Greats Conversation](#), [Russian Lit](#) by [cleopatra](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#) [\[https://classicalcarousel.com/what-is-to-be-done-by-nikolai-chernyshevsky/\]](https://classicalcarousel.com/what-is-to-be-done-by-nikolai-chernyshevsky/).

12 THOUGHTS ON “WHAT IS TO BE DONE? BY NIKOLAI CHERNYSHEVSKY”



Amateur Reader (Tom)

on **August 19, 2015 at 13:29** said:

How wonderful, seeing the ripples of my Chernyshevsky reading event. How nice to see more people reading this bad book.

I would argue that classic fiction not only knows Chernyshevsky's book but is permeated with it. The conversation does not end with *Notes from the Underground* but continues well into the 20th century, spilling over into other languages – Conrad, for example. I just came across a Chernyshevskian revolutionary in *Germinal*!



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Congrats! 😊 I shall join you in reading Dostoyevsky, since my next book is The Brothers

Karamazov (eep, help, I haven't even been reading much! I'm in a slump!).

One thing that kind of amused me about this bad book was that Chernyshevsky is obviously completely ignorant about sewing and running a business and running a sewing business. He just hasn't got a clue, and yet all these people said "Yes! This will work! Let's do it!" Crazy.



cleopatra

on **August 19, 2015 at 14:23** said:

Yes, I saw Jean had read it and then, through her, it went back to you where I noticed the Turgenev/Dostoyevsky link. Since I'd just read Fathers and Sons, I thought it would be beneficial to read the three of them.

You're right; I find various philosophies of various writers cropping up in various shapes and forms. Which is probably why I saw Nietzsche in Chernyshevsky, or perhaps I should say Chernyshevsky in Nietzsche although I'm sure Nietzsche would argue against that. It does seem though, that few readers of the classics nowadays have heard of this book, which is a shame because, in spite of whether one agrees with Chernyshevsky or not, it is so obviously an important book in Russian history.

Thanks, I'll keep that in mind when I get to Conrad.



Amateur Reader (Tom)

on **August 19, 2015 at 14:27** said:

Oh, you meant *readers* of classic fiction. Yes, those folks should spend more time learning about literary history.

The Secret Agent is the Conrad novel I had in mind.

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cleopatra

on **August 19, 2015 at 14:29** said:

I have to admit that I was so glad to finish this one, yet it still pulls me back. I wish it was shorter; then there would be much more of a chance of my reading it again.

Dostoyevsky still scares me a little but my book is tiny so it can't be too bad. Have fun with The Brothers K.

Re: sewing business ~~ Yes, yes & yes! It doesn't matter that I'm the owner of the business, have taken the risk and put in my own money and work and sweat to start the business, I'll just give all my workers all the profits because, really, I don't need the money. And then the workers will only respect the owner and work harder and will be open to ANYTHING the owner suggests. Ha! Never mind business, what bothered me more was that Chernyshevsky didn't seem to have a clue about human nature. Crazy, indeed!



Ruth

on **August 19, 2015 at 17:45** said:

Love how you end your post with a hopeful question...

GREAT POST! My head is spinning.

At some point I had *Notes From the Underground* on one of my reading challenges (but I since removed it), and I said I would read it with you, but after reading your post, I know I want to read both *Father's and Sons* and *What is to be Done?* first. I am inspired to start at the beginning of this argument.

Oh, no! I wonder if all of this will lead me to reread one of my most disliked books from my WEM list, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.



Amateur Reader (Tom)

on **August 19, 2015 at 17:50** said:

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Wait, *Under Western Eyes*, that is the other Conrad novel full of terrorists. I knew I was forgetting one.



cleopatra

on **August 19, 2015 at 19:56** said:

😊 Part way through this book became a real chore but I do think it's worth reading, if nothing else to realize that there ARE people who see the world like this and obviously there must have been others who did too. It at least gives you a chance to try to understand their viewpoint. I'm following the crux of the arguments but I do think it would be helpful for me to read a little Russian history. Then I'd understand it even more.

Ooo, now I'm curious. I'm off to read your Heart of Darkness review. I thought the Toni Morrison book (was it Song of Solomon?) was your most disliked WEM book.



cleopatra

on **August 19, 2015 at 19:57** said:

You're making me want to move Conrad up my list. I tried Heart of Darkness years ago, but I know I didn't ** get ** it then. There must be something unique about Conrad because people seem to either love him or hate him.



Ruth

on **August 19, 2015 at 23:36** said:

Yes, Song of Solomon was my most hated (but I only read one chapter); so of the books I finished, I loathed Heart of Darkness. Part of me thinks I also didn't get it, and I wonder if

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Anonymous

on **August 22, 2015 at 09:51** said:

After Nietzsche talking at you...now Chernyshevsky is doing the same.

This sounds like an exhausting read during a beautiful summer. Heart of Darkness won't be any better. I am a huge fan of Conrad but will not be reading HoD. He wrote so many other 'better' books in my opinion (see blog for my reviews). The scandals of Lord Jim, revolution in Nostromo and lesser know works about novice skippers struggling to take command 'Falk' and 'The Shadow-Line'. All are worth your reading time....I have left HoD on the bookshelf!

**cleopatra**on **August 22, 2015 at 14:27** said:

Honestly I haven't had much luck with my summer reads lately. Oh, actually last summer wasn't too bad, but the summer before everything I read was completely depressing (unintentionally). I think my best summer read was Middlemarch but that was about 6 years ago.

I'm going to your blog to see if I can find out why you don't want to read HoD. Thanks for the heads up I'm definitely going to need a break before tackling other books that are challenging in this way.

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